

TESTIMONY OF

RICHARD COLLINS

**ASSISTANT TO THE NATIONAL PRESIDENT
NATIONAL POSTAL MAIL HANDLERS UNION**

before the

**COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

***REOPENING OF THE U.S. POSTAL SERVICE'S
JOSEPH CURSEEN JR. AND THOMAS MORRIS JR.
MAIL PROCESSING & DISTRIBUTION CENTER
(BRENTWOOD FACILITY)***

OCTOBER 23, 2003

Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members of the Committee. I am Richard Collins, Assistant to the National President of the National Postal Mail Handlers Union. On behalf of 50,000 union mail handlers employed by the U.S. Postal Service, including approximately 500 mail handlers who work at the Curseen and Morris Processing & Distribution Center, I appreciate the opportunity to testify about the reopening of that facility.

As you know, the employees represented by the Mail Handlers Union are an essential part of the mail processing and distribution network utilized by the Postal Service to move more than 200 billion pieces of mail each year. Mail handlers work in all of the nation's large postal plants, and are responsible for loading and unloading trucks, transporting mail within the facility, preparing the mail for distribution and delivery, operating a host of machinery and automated equipment, and containerizing mail for subsequent delivery. Our members are generally the first and the last employees to handle the mail as it comes to, goes through, and leaves most postal plants.

As always, our paramount concern must be the safety and well-being of postal employees, including all mail handlers. This includes not only ensuring that the Curseen-Morris facility is free of anthrax, but also making sure that the employees are emotionally ready, willing, and able to move back into the facility.

To this end, the Mail Handlers Union has been an active participant in the Mail Security Task Force – established by postal management and

including representatives of all unions and employee associations – which has been meeting regularly since October 2001 to ensure that all reasonable measures are being taken to prevent any further infection from anthrax or other biological agents. We also have been active supporters of the efforts to obtain sufficient Congressional funding for the clean-up efforts, both here at Curseen-Morris and at other postal facilities along the Eastern seaboard. We particularly appreciate the efforts made by the Members of this Committee, and fervently hope that the Congress will continue to provide complete funding for the costs imposed on the Postal Service because of the anthrax attacks and their aftermath.

Turning to the present situation at Curseen-Morris, again our primary concern must be the health and welfare of the postal employees who work at Curseen-Morris, and who for the past two years have been scattered around in neighboring postal facilities. To meet these concerns, the employees at Curseen-Morris must know that the facility is safe.

First, the employees at Curseen-Morris must know that all levels of government and postal management have done everything possible, using the best available science and technology, to ensure that the Curseen-Morris facility is fully decontaminated. To this point, each and every scientific study conducted about Curseen-Morris, and each and every environmental sample taken at Curseen-Morris, have demonstrated that the facility is ready to be reopened. Several representatives of the Mail Handlers Union, including me,

have toured the facility, both in June of this year and, most recently, on October 8, 2003, to ensure that the facility is clean and clear of anthrax.

Second, the employees at Curseen-Morris must be kept fully informed about the latest developments, including information about the actual clean-up, so that there is no misinformation disseminated, and so that the rumor mill is not allowed to operate. It is my understanding that the employees have received routine safety talks about the reopening of the facility, that the Postal Service has been mailing copies of these talks to affected employees, and that the Postal Service currently is trying to arrange a tour of the facility for employees prior to its official reopening. While communications with employees generally have been good, there is a need to do additional training on the emergency protocols that will control after the reopening of the facility.

Third, the employees at Curseen-Morris must know that they have a choice on whether to return, so that employees who are experiencing particular fear or anxiety can choose not to return to Curseen-Morris, without any loss of pay or economic benefits. The Mail Handlers Union and the Postal Service recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding that grants each mail handler who previously worked at Curseen-Morris, but who does not want to return to that facility, an opportunity to transfer to a nearby location. That transfer will be accomplished pursuant to longstanding rules that govern voluntary transfers, as negotiated in Article 12 of our collective bargaining agreement.

Fourth, the employees at Curseen-Morris must know that, when they return to Curseen-Morris, they will be carefully monitored for any illnesses or other adverse side effects – whether physical or emotional – especially during the first few days and weeks after the facility is reopened.

Fifth, the employees at Curseen-Morris must know that the reopening of Curseen-Morris is not the end of our concerns, but rather another starting point, from which the Postal Service will take all steps that are necessary and use whatever technologies are available to ensure that postal employees, and the mail that they process, remain safe.

Sixth, the employees at Curseen-Morris must know that their elected representatives, meaning the union representatives at the Local level, will continue to be active participants in the process that leads up to, and follows, the reopening of the Curseen-Morris facility.

If these general guidelines are followed, I believe that the reopening of Curseen-Morris can be accomplished smoothly and successfully. All of the participants must work together to ensure the safety, and the well-being, of the employees at Curseen-Morris. Anything less would increase the fear and anxiety of these postal employees, who already have suffered too much.

Thank you, and I will be glad to answer any questions you may have.